

10.26.2007 - Our Duty to Our Veterans

Since 1776, millions of Americans have answered the call to serve our nation at home and abroad. West Virginians have long been among the first to report for duty, and on Veterans Day, we celebrate them and all American veterans for their service to our nation. Veterans put their lives on the line for this country. It is our duty to ensure they receive the respect and benefits worthy of their noble sacrifice.

Americans have sent a strong signal to our government that they want, and our troops deserve, better care for our veterans. With more and more troops returning injured from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is essential that we have a network of the highest quality and most affordable health care in place to help them to a speedy recovery.

To do this, we must insist that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) receives the necessary resources to deliver services and maintain its status as a premier health care system and benefits provider.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the VA's budget has been severely trimmed, suffering shortfalls of \$1 billion in 2005 and \$2 billion in 2006, and a cut in funding is a cut in care. This is an incredible disservice to those who have served their country honorably. I believe it is the duty of the Congress to see to it that our veterans have access to the highest services and health care that we possibly can provide.

For over three decades, I have rallied my colleagues in Congress to fight cuts to VA funding that have been proposed through the years. As an outspoken proponent of mandatory funding for the VA and a cosponsor of the Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act, I am dedicated to taking the health care of our nation's heroes off of the budgetary chopping block. This bill would make VA health care a mandatory spending item within the federal budget. VA health care is currently the only major federal health program that is not funded through mandatory spending.

Working with the West Virginia Veterans of Foreign Wars and national veterans groups such as the American Legion, I have also introduced legislation to expand benefits to the brave men and women who have risked their lives defending America.

Under current law, certain veterans are not eligible for pensions unless the VA Secretary waives a "period of war" requirement to receive the benefit.

My legislation would extend eligibility for pension benefits to veterans who served during conflicts in Korea, Lebanon, Grenada and other specified areas that were not officially declared "periods of war." The sacrifices made by these young men and women should be equal to the compensation awarded.

Throughout our history, we have witnessed the personal courage and sacrifice made by millions of American veterans who have served our country. They have done so proudly and without hesitation, to protect our freedom and our way of life, and to help ensure peace around the globe.

Currently, there are 25 million veterans in the United States, including over 180,000 in West Virginia. Every West Virginia veteran is a hero. When they left their homes and families for military service, they knew what price they may have to pay to keep our nation safe. They knew their duty, and they did it.

On this Veterans Day, it is our duty, as citizens of this great nation, to stand up for our veterans, who selflessly gave of themselves in the name of freedom. We should honor and recognize their service by providing them with the respect, benefits and services that they have earned and that our nation has promised.

The health and well-being of our veterans remains foremost in the hearts and minds of West Virginians, and their care remains one of my top priorities in Congress.

Veterans represent the best of America, and although we can never adequately thank them for their service and sacrifice for our nation, we can do everything in our power to honor them when they return home.